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Reenvisioning Equity Research: Disability Identification Disparities as a Case in Point

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I engage longstanding challenges and risks associated with conducting and using research on complex equity problems. I engage these challenges in the context of research on disability identification disparities, which have been historically intertwined with particular identity markers (e.g., race, social class, gender, language). Some of these tensions revolve around knowledge production, the nuances of representation, and the identities of oppressed groups. I critique traditional research on disability identification disparities and outline guiding principles for the next generation of equity research. First, future research on disability intersections must rely on *historical epistemologies* to honor the complexities of equity in worlds of difference. Second, the next generation of research must produce *alternative interdisciplinary re-presentations* of disability intersections.

Keywords: case studies; equity; ethics; special education

The *Brown* Lecture is a crucial reminder about two consequential ideas. First, research matters to change society, but it can also be used to reproduce injustices. For example, the uses of research evidence in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) afforded a key strategy to advance educational equity by juxtaposing an abstract legal order that perpetuated White supremacy with research evidence about the material consequences of school racial segregation. On the other hand, research can perpetuate social stratification and injustices (Rodriguez, 2018) (e.g., *Brown*'s uses of research contributed to a deficit-laden view of African American children [Austin, 2004]). Because science entails complex translational processes (Jasanoff, 2018), researchers should be vigilant about the ways representations of findings can reproduce educational inequalities.

Second, the power of research as an engine of advancement rests in its rigorous technical foundations and its moral mindfulness about the cultural historical conditions that permeate societal problems. Researchers (like judges) are epistemological gatekeepers (Jasanoff, 2018)—they determine "which . . . claims are entitled to consideration . . . or not, thereby privileging certain ways of knowing above others" (p. 16). Researchers also exercise ontological power "by deciding how to classify and categorize things"

(Jasanoff, 2018, p. 17). The academy has been historically divided about these epistemological and ontological considerations with regard to the moral dimension of research, despite the justice underpinnings of the problems it studies. The regrettable roles of research during the Holocaust, the eugenics movement, and other prominent cases across disciplines that harmed marginalized communities illustrate these dilemmas. Leaders and scholars have pressed scholars to embrace a moral commitment in research activities. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (1968), in his address to the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues, admonished that "the social scientist played little or no role in disclosing truth" about the oppression of Black communities, about "the brutal facts of southern segregated life" (p. 180).

Despite these pleas, a recent cultural shift in scientific research has been described as "science in the age of selfies" (Geman & Geman, 2016) with an attendant erosion of moral considerations and growing incentives for pursuing funded research identified by third parties. Degree of exposure—often operationalized by curriculum vitae (CV) length and "citation-fishing" (Lawrence, 2007, p. 583)—increasingly shape researchers' promotion and

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compensation. Many discoveries "are essentially detections of 'statistically significant' patterns in big data. . . . even if . . . *utterly lacking any supporting theory*" (Geman & Geman, 2016, p. 9386, emphasis added). Research's moral dimension is still largely invisible.

A core premise of this article is that the moral commitments of researchers are as critical today as they were in the 20th century. The ambiguity about a moral commitment is untenable given the deepening of inequality and the resurgence of a discourse of deficits in the United States (Darity, 2011). What are the implications for educational equity research?

As we embrace theory and methodological rigor in research, we should also use the moral compass that Dr. King challenged us to adopt in our investigations. Equally important, we must refine epistemological and representational practices to avoid past inadequacies of equity studies. For this purpose, I outline two considerations for future equity research, namely a historical epistemology and a plurality of problem representations. I expect my arguments will challenge us to rethink the truisms of a field (Hall, 1997). I build on Luria's model of science that combines nomothetic and ideographic approaches to produce knowledge that explains the nature of phenomena and also documents their rich "historically evolving social, cultural and psychological environments" (Lamdan & Yasnitsky, 2013, p. 1).

I ground my arguments in the scholarship on disability identification disparities as a case in point (typically interlocked with race, social class, gender, and/or language). This longstanding problem includes mild disabilities, which constitute the majority of learners in special education—learning disabilities (LD), intellectual disabilities (ID), emotional/behavioral disorders (E/BD), and speech/language impairments. These learners inhabit *multiple* marked categories and have historically endured the ignoble harms of inequality. Moreover, learners with disabilities constitute an important segment of the U.S. school population—6.6 million learners (13%) (NCES, 2019). It is estimated that 61 million adults have disabilities in the United States and one billion people have disabilities worldwide (i.e., 15% of the world's population [World Bank, 2017]). Yet, as Zola (1989) reminded us, disability is a universal human condition (i.e., every person will experience disabilities, temporarily or permanently, at least once in their lifetime).

The following two assertions encapsulate my core arguments:

1. **Education research must be grounded in a historical epistemology**.

Education research has remained largely colorblind or framed with a prism of damaged people of color (Valencia, 2010). This is most evident in the disability identification disparity research (Artiles, Kozleski, Trent, Osher, & Ortiz, 2010). However, equity research cannot disregard history. Perception, a crucial tool of researchers, is historical (Wartofsky, 1987). This is particularly important when we conduct investigations on/with "marked communities/individuals." Thus, we should not ignore the intertwined pasts of disability with race, social class, gender, immigration, and language (Baynton, 2001; Carlson, 2001). A crucial challenge for researchers, therefore, is to embrace a new imagination (Wartofsky, 1985) when studying equity interventions, so that these remedies

are not disconnected from "historical, moral, social, economic, and political ties to racialized practices and ideologies" (Gutiérrez & Jaramillo, 2006, p. 184).

2. **Educational research should rely on alternative representations of equity problems.**

The lack of a historical imagination in equity research influences how problems and study participants are represented in the literature. How we represent what we study matters, such as a child's disability or a classroom intervention. These representations purportedly capture the essence of children or a district's organizational culture. Due to the epistemic cultures that mediate investigators' professional visions (Goodwin, 1994), research evidence makes perceptible only facets of the phenomena under study. Hence, we must aspire to craft "different interpretations of the same facts" (Clarke & McCall, 2013, p. 351) to produce interdisciplinary collages of findings derived from alternative theoretical and methodological paradigms.

I organize the manuscript in three sections. First, I situate my analysis in the scholarship on disability identification disparities. Second, I outline two considerations for future equity research on this problem. I close with a brief conclusion.

It's About Histories and Contexts: The Long Past and Short History of Disability Identification Disparities

Significant policy and practice advances have been attained for students with disabilities. On the other hand, a disability diagnosis has equity ramifications that include academic achievement gaps, higher school dropout, discipline inequities, closer association with the juvenile justice system, reduced access to college, and limited participation in the job market and civic engagement. These consequences reflect the dual nature of disability as an object of *both* protection and stratification (Artiles, Dorn, & Bal, 2016). Disability identification disparities exemplify this dialectical tension. The disproportionality research is surprisingly recent, despite its visibility since the 1960s. The bulk of this research has been narrowly framed with a binary logic—do disparities stem from professionals' biases or students' deficits? (Artiles, 2011) Investigators have studied the mediating power of professionals' beliefs and biases in perceptions of students and referral and identification decisions, hence erasing the structural weights and relational nature of racism, ableism, and educational injustices. Surveys and simulations have been used in a limited fashion (Waitoller, Artiles, & Cheney, 2010). This literature shows mixed results, despite evidence on the mediating role of implicit bias and stereotyping on teacher negative responses to students of color in the context of school discipline and teacher expectations (Cherng, 2017; Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015). See Table 1.

To summarize, disability disparities test our assumptions about justice, for they connote that an equity remedy for an oppressed group (i.e., special education) can create inequities for other marginalized groups (e.g., African Americans, ELLs). We need a focus on disability as an object of protection and a tool of stratification. Systematic attention to context and historical contingencies is imperative; in other words, a situated approach is

Table 1
Disability Identification Disparities: A Binary Logic and Narrow Framings

- Disproportionality includes overrepresentation, which has received by far the most attention from researchers and the general public. Nonetheless, under-representation is equally problematic.
- The disproportionality debate is 50+ years old and has largely focused on race, particularly as it affects African Americans and to a lesser extent Native Americans, Latinx, and more recently, English language learners (ELLs). Deliberations have also covered identification disparities related to social class and gender.
- The National Academy of Sciences published two reports in 1982 and 2002. Both reports confirmed the existence of this problem (Donovan & Cross, 2002; Heller, Holtzman, & Messick, 1982).
- The bulk of the empirical knowledge base is relatively new and intellectually insular—most studies have appeared in special education journals.
- Over half of the studies published between 1968 and 2006 appeared after 2000.
- Over 30% were released between 2004 and 2006.
- Mixed findings with blurry theorizing plague this literature, often with opposite views (Artiles, 2011; Morgan et al., 2015; Shifrer, 2018; Shifrer & Fish, 2019; Skiba, Artiles, Kozleski, Losen, & Harry, 2016).

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needed to study disability identification disparities. The following case study exemplifies these points.

The Case of Kanita

Kanita's experiences shed light on the nuanced contours of disability intersections with marked categories.[1] She lived with her grandmother in the Southeast and attended a public school serving an African American and low-income population (97% were eligible for free/reduced lunch). Seven percent of the students had IDs, and about 10% were diagnosed with LDs. Learners with IDs were placed in self-contained classes, while students with LD were served in resource rooms.

The researchers visited the grandmother's home four times. They reported "[t]he living room. . . was filled with photographs of [family members], as well as [kids'] trophies and certificates . . . at least three of which were Kanita's" (Harry, Klingner, & Cramer, 2007, p. 36). Kanita's aunt and her child lived in the same home; two other aunts visited frequently. Every day, several cousins came to this house after school, though their parents picked them up every evening. Kanita's father lived close and visited her regularly.

Kanita's performance in kindergarten showed no signs of behavioral problems, and performance reports did not raise concerns. Ms. Little, her African American kindergarten teacher had a record of low referral rates. Ms. Little recalled that Kanita had a difficult year in her classroom: She cried easily and had a proclivity for temper tantrums. But she believed these inappropriate behaviors reflected Kanita's longing for her mother, who was incarcerated. Ms. Little successfully redirected Kanita's inappropriate behaviors before her behaviors escalated.

Kanita's first grade teacher, Ms. Edison (a White veteran of 16 years), reported a low parental response for routine parent-teacher conferences and also believed children in the nearby neighborhoods were used to having parents incarcerated. Ms. Edison's referrals to special education had escalated to the point that she referred half the class that year. She referred Kanita that year for behavioral reasons—attention issues, temper tantrums, crying, and threatening teachers and students with bodily harm.

Kanita was evaluated at the beginning of second grade. Ms. Lewis, the evaluator, was described as a "pleasant White woman probably over 60" (Harry, Klingner, & Cramer, 2007, p. 31).

She shared that Kanita's family was "dysfunctional" (p. 31). At some point, she relayed that a "bunch of people [were] living in the home" (p. 32). Kanita engaged eagerly for two hours to complete the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children III (WISC III). By the time Ms. Lewis finished the clinical interview and projective tests, Kanita "had slid halfway under the table and was mumbling many of her answers" (p. 32).

The assessment results showed an average intelligence level and middle to high scores in virtually all achievement areas. The aunt present at the placement conference thought Kanita's grandmother was "too soft" on her to compensate for the mother's absence. By the end of this meeting, the grandmother said "quietly but firmly, 'She's a bit rebellious. But there's nothing wrong with her. She just wants her momma" (Harry, Klingner, & Cramer, 2007, p. 33). Kanita was diagnosed with E/BD and was placed in a self-contained program at a different school serving a predominantly African American population.

Kanita completed the second grade in the E/BD classroom along with 12 other students. All teacher reports and observations that year were positive. Ms. Thorpe, a White woman in her late thirties with 10 years of experience with E/BD students, was Kanita's teacher. All reports were signed daily by the grandmother, and the teacher reported at an individualized education program (IEP) meeting in the spring that "Kanita loves to learn and is eager to please." Ms. Thorpe "did not see her as having a disability" (Harry, Klingner, & Cramer, 2007, p. 34).

Kanita remained in the E/BD classroom with Ms. Thorpe during third grade. She joined the general education classroom for reading and math in the fall and was fully integrated in January. Kanita's third grade reading and math scores were at or slightly above grade level. Kanita was placed in a gifted program located at her previous school as she started fourth grade. She excelled in this program, though she still had the E/BD label. Ms. Thorpe was protective of her and did not want to release Kanita from the IEP. During this year, Kanita exhibited inappropriate behaviors (e.g., passing notes, not waiting for her turn) and experienced some difficulties, such as crying regularly, for which she received counseling services. These occurrences were purportedly connected to her desire to live with her mother. The researchers learned she was spending weekends with her mother that year. Kanita exited special education when she started sixth grade.

There are four key points in Kanita's story that are germane to this article's core arguments.

1. Kanita's case illustrates **dilemmas of equity**, as she moved from programs that provided *differential* (special education, gifted) and *similar* (general education) treatments. Researchers disagree on the equity perspectives that should inform studies on students living at the intersections of marked categories.

2. Kanita's story reflects the tensions between the essentializing power of **deficit views** and the complexities of her life. This is marked by her first grade teacher's high referral rates and statements about students' dysfunctional families. Also, there were incongruities between some professionals' deficit views of Kanita (and Black families) and the fact that she lived with a loving family led by the grandmother who held together supports and social capital across three generations.

3. Kanita's story reflected the **dangers and opportunities of representational practices** (e.g., the divergent views of the kindergarten and first grade teachers). The referral decision was a pivotal moment. Was Kanita misidentified? Kanita's first grade experiences prior to referral suggest limited opportunities to learn. The assessment data raised questions about discontinuities across behavioral, social, and cognitive domains. Other teachers reported alternative views of Kanita (i.e., E/BD, gifted, motivated to learn, irritable). There were also disparate interpretations of Kanita's behavior *within* her own family.

4. Regarding the **consequences of a disability diagnosis**, Kanita's story made visible the gulf between her labels and the adults' interpretations and responses—such distance protected *and* curtailed her educational opportunities. Kanita's special education teacher was an advocate. But she would not let Kanita shed her disability diagnosis.

This case study illuminates the ways Kanita's representations reveal shades and layers of identities and the appearance of life details. In light of these consequential research challenges, I outline two guidelines to inform future scholarship.

Of Time and Representation: Reenvisioning Equity Research

Dangers of Amnesic Science: Historical Epistemologies in Disability Intersections Research

A core limitation of this literature is the disregard for history. I submit this scholarship should be grounded in a *historical epistemology* (Wartofsky, 1985). This standpoint refashions the link between human perception and knowledge creation. After all, perception is a building block of observational and recording practices that are central to research. Furthermore, perception constitutes a sophisticated form of historically evolved human praxis that is mediated by *representation*. As Wartofsky (1985) asserted, "perception has a history" (p. 218). Wartofsky (1985) offered a brilliant illustration:

The hunter, hearing a crack of a branch, or seeing a sudden flight of birds, transforms that very sound and sight into an artifact—an instrument—of the hunt itself. But what the cracking branch is heard *as* is already an index of a social mode of praxis—of hunting, in this case—and therefore, insofar as the hunt has a specific historical form or function, nature itself has become historicized and socialized, and has come to be a *representation* of a certain mode of praxis or human action (p. 233).

Research on disability identification inequities neither makes visible the histories of disability and other difference markers such as race, nor exposes the questionable ways in which these constructs have been historically interlaced and represented. Interdisciplinary evidence suggests that perceptions of disability and race have been negatively represented throughout history. In fact, "not only has it been considered justifiable to treat disabled people unequally, but the *concept* of disability has been used to justify discrimination against other groups by attributing disability to them" (Baynton, 2001, p. 33, emphasis in original). Historical responses to disability reflect an ambivalence between efforts to make it disappear and assimilate. See Table 2.

Of significance, research tools and practices have been used to represent race and disability as objective entities. But Gates (1985) reminded us that "[race] is the ultimate trope of difference because it is so very arbitrary in its application" (p. 5). The eugenics movement is a case in point. Its attention to feeble-mindedness consolidated the validation of hierarchies of difference, especially with regard to gender, race, and social class, and influenced educational policy and practices in multiple societal domains (Lowe, 2000).

What happens to old views, values, and practices about the disabled, non-Whites, and immigrants? Although many of the crude expressions of racism, ableism, and nativism have changed, various disciplines have documented for decades that the legacies of these standpoints, laws, and practices contributed to the conflation of disability, race, and other identity categories with deviance. The sedimentation of these historical legacies led to the emergence of a deficit common sense about racialized and other non-White groups as people with damaged psyches (Ladson-Billings, 2017) which "become embedded in policy as messages that are absorbed by citizens and affect their orientations and participation patterns" (Schneider & Ingram, 1993, p. 334). Remember the views of some school staff about Kanita, her family, and community. These are "the burdens of representation" (Hall, 1996, p. 277). Why do we make these uses of the past and for what purposes?

These legacies position students of color with disabilities in a double bind stemming from the historical baggage of such marked categories (Artiles, 2011). Nevertheless, the favored stance in this research is colorblindness. Disability and other marked identity categories have been largely treated as static demographic variables. School and community poverty concentrations are examined to gauge risks of disability identification. School location—urban versus suburban—is also included in predictive models. But theoretical poverty and a lack of historical imagination characterize many studies. Not surprisingly, complex interactions, mixed findings, and fuzzy interpretations plague this work.

Table 2
Historical Snapshots of Disability's Intersections

Schweik (2009) documented the use of the so-called "ugly laws" at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries. These laws "repress[ed] the visibility of human diversity in social contexts associated with disability and poverty" (p. 3). Of significance, the use of ugly laws peaked in the 1890s, just at the time when racial segregation was the law in the South, federal immigration law excluded people with mental and physical defects, and the eugenics movement was gaining strength (Schweik, 2009). These facts constitute a sad reminder about the longstanding trope in American history that entangles disability with race, gender, ethnicity, disease, and immigration as categories that require surveillance and potentially limit opportunities.

The Immigration Act of 1882 denied entry to the United States to the "lunatic, idiot, or any person unable to take care of himself or herself without becoming a public charge" (Baynton, 2005, p. 33). In 1903 the category epilepsy and people who "have been insane within five years previous [or] who have had two or more attacks of insanity at any time previously" were included (Baynton, 2005, p. 33). In 1907 "imbeciles" and "feeble-minded persons" were added to the law, and in 1917 individuals with "constitutional psychopathic inferiority" were not allowed entry—the latter group referred to people living "on the border line between sanity and insanity, such as . . . persons with abnormal sex instincts" (Baynton, 2005, p. 33).

Public health and disease also intermingled these categories of difference, with race playing a prominent role. As Nancy Krieger (2011) described, "[r]acial categories become so entrenched and 'naturalized' in scientific thought that, by the early-to-mid nineteenth century, medical discussion about populations— and research on their health status—without 'racial' categories became virtually unimaginable" (pp. 89, 91). And thus, a string of articles and reports (both scientific and popular) were disseminated comparing White individuals with African Americans on intellectual ability, mental health, illness rates, moral character, anatomical differences, and so forth. These records consistently established the superiority of the White race.

Traditional research perpetuates "black abstraction," "the refusal to depict blacks in any real and vividly drawn social context" (Ross, 1990, p. 2). Many studies are reported as if participants live suspended in time, thus erasing the historical legacies of discrimination and devoid of contemporary material and political conditions. For instance, researchers tend to detach poverty from its historical contexts; it is treated as a static trait—of individuals or communities. We know that poverty, particularly intense and intergenerational poverty, inflicts terrible harms on people, but many of these studies do not account for the historical association of poverty with structural forces. Consider the historical link between the roots of racial segregation in Kanita's community and the attendant poverty and low school quality, funding, and opportunity to learn that she had to contend with.

Resilience and ingenuity—the learning that is forged across "contexts, purposes, kinds of learners and consequences" is not taken into account in these analyses (McDermott, 2010, p. 155). Think about the distance between some school staff's views of Kanita's family and what investigators documented at her home. The socio-emotional resources and cultural strengths Kanita had at home defy simplistic understandings of the lives of low-income families of color.

The monumental challenge researchers face, therefore, is to make visible the historical residues of disability entanglements with other marked categories. We should not lose sight of the fact that perception and praxis are interconnected; thus, perceptions change over time as human activities are transformed. As we witness the evolution of school racial segregation to de-segregation, and more recently to re-segregation, we must ponder: What are the implications of these changes for the research questions we pose about disability identification disparities? After all, a historical epistemology "undertakes the task . . . of investigating both the mechanisms of change of perceptual modes, and the history of these changes" (Wartofsky, 1985, p. 237). We need a historical imagination to inform future research, an imagination encoded in a "grammar of hope, possibility, and resilience" (Gutiérrez, 2016, p. 2).

There are disability disparity studies inspired by a historical epistemology. For instance, Eitle (2002) studied this problem in the contexts of racial and political-economic structures, school district structures, and school desegregation politics. Using structural theories of race relations and drawn from a sample of 981 public schools, Eitle found that these factors were "associated with the patterning of the representation of black students in [Mild ID] programs" (p. 599). Eitle reported:

- a higher level of White poverty [resulted] in lower representation of Black students in [mild ID] programs and suggest that this is because there will be a greater need for these programs to service white students. However, . . . when white poverty is . . . greater than 17% this is not the case. [Eitle argued that] in localities with very high white poverty rates there may be more discrimination against black students in schools because of increased racial competition and antagonism (p. 599)
- between-school segregation, court pressure to desegregate, white flight to private schools, and a history of de jure segregation [were] important factors that affect[ed] the representation of black students in [Mild ID] programs . . . [T]he effects of these factors var[ied] depending on the proportion of black students enrolled in the school district (p. 599).

Another example is a study that we are completing in suburban school districts in the Northeast (Tefera, Kramarczuk Voulgarides, Artiles, Aylward, & Diaz, 2019; Voulgarides, Tefera, Aylward, & Artiles, 2019).[2] We studied how educators and district leaders made sense of disproportionality and state citations, as well as the historical antecedents and contextual forces surrounding these citations. One of the districts, Lakeview (pseudonym), grew in the 1960s when many White residents flew out of the city center as African Americans were moving in. Between 2004 and 2011, there was a 127% increase in the number of students of color, a 13% decrease in the number of White students, and a nearly 7% decrease in the total number of students.

Our emerging findings resonate with Eitle's (2002) study. Disproportionality was linked to enduring struggles surrounding racial segregation and re-segregation embedded in spatial dynamics

that dated back to the 1960s. There were histories of attempted desegregation in Lakeview in the preceding decades that, in the words of a district administrator, "became highly controversial . . . I think in the end the superintendent ended up leaving, quite honestly, because the pressures were so intense" (Tefera, Kramarczuk et al., 2019, p. 20). Racial segregation held up.

Second, space and history contributed to the theories that local actors invoked to differentiate communities and justify disproportionality. Lakeview was adjacent to Center City (pseudonym), one of the largest and most segregated cities in the state. This proximity was often used to point out that transfer learners from the inner city were damaged, and the suburban district was known for its excellence and high expectations. A high school administrator explained: "when a student transfers into our building, and our expectations are set a little bit higher, some of those people are caught off guard . . . is this an appropriate setting for them to be transferring [into], if they're a student with . . . a special education, or if they're just an African American student" (Tefera, Kramarczuk et al., 2019, p. 23)? Similarly, a high school special education teacher reasoned: "When a lot of the urban creep started and we were seeing a lot of kids coming from the city, they would come into our classes and they couldn't keep up" (Tefera, Kramarczuk et al., 2019, p. 23). In short, historico-spatial dynamics were tied to beliefs about race, ability, academic preparedness, and expectations.

Notwithstanding the training on culturally relevant education offered to all district personnel, deficit thinking and colorblindness prevailed. The insights from these studies add nuance to our understanding of this problem and disrupt the a-theoretical and decontextualized documentation of disability identification predictors (Skiba et al., 2016).

Revisioning Re-Presentation to Illuminate the Fluid Nature of Marked Categories

This literature consistently alludes to the idea of *representation*, but researchers rarely make visible the *theoretical underpinnings* of this notion. *Representation* has been used "descriptively merely to index *physical presence*" (Artiles, 2004, p. 552, emphasis in original). Some scholars use the term with the implicit expectation of balanced racial groups placed in special education. Other scholars argue that disproportionality reflects life experiences (Edgard & Sedgwick, 1999) because disability prevalence among students of color merely indexes the consequences of high poverty rates.

These uses of representation are limited. We must transcend counting the color of bodies in disability boxes. We should understand the *situated meanings of disability in the socio-historical contexts of global societies that mediate what counts as disabled, who gets this label, and the consequences of such institutional decisions.* The heart of this problem is educational opportunity (i.e., how placement decisions advance learning opportunities and outcomes for students of color). This would require defining representation in socio-historical terms to make visible the assumptions and traditions of representing. Representation has been differentiated "as depiction (*a picture of*) and as proxy (*an act of speaking for*)" (Hayden, 2011, loc 4772), which typically

represents particular interests. Researchers must produce interdisciplinary re-presentations grounded in these connotations because they raise questions about perspective (whose standpoint?), voice (who's being heard?), and consequences (what's the end result?). In this sense, researchers must be concerned with forms of ethical seeing, particularly because disciplinary frames make visible only certain slices of phenomena, while they make others invisible. As Wartofsky (1985) explained, "our canons of representation, the very styles and conventions of our picturing teach us to see differently" (p. 233).

Theorizing representation from this perspective affords new interdisciplinary visions of disproportionality. We must bring into conversation representational practices to study inequities across disciplines with disability identification disparities scholarship. This strategy will enable us to reimagine the very *nature* of disability and its intersecting marked categories. The multiple (even contradictory) "versions" of Kanita hint at the power of this new imagination. This standpoint also compels us to engage the cultural-historical complexities of this problem and empower us to understand how "numbers seemed both essential and insufficient" (Poovey, 1998, p. xi). To illustrate, counting disability by body colors in datasets like National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS), Early Childhood Longitudinal Study (ECLS), and Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) is done differently. Some datasets rely on parent reports, whereas others draw from teacher reports, yet others use state head count reports (Skiba et al., 2016). This variability reminds us that *numbers have theories* (Poovey, 1998). Therefore, collages of multi-modal, multi-perspectival and multi-vocal approaches traversing scales, contexts, sectors, and times are needed to represent the multifaceted nature of disability disparities. This need has been stressed in special education (Connor, Gallagher, & Ferri, 2011) and beyond (e.g., anthropology [Tobin, Arzubiaga, & Adair, 2013; see section on multimodal anthropologies in *American Anthropologist*]).

Broadening representation's theoretical breadth enables researchers to document the fluid nature of disability. McDermott (1993), for instance, made visible the kaleidoscope of disability, as he followed Adam, a student with LDs, across multiple contexts. Like Kanita, a different version of Adam crystallized contingent upon the institutional occasions in which he participated. Researchers can infuse movement and hybridity to the fossilized models of culture used in education research to understand how students of color engage in identity sampling (Gutiérrez & Johnson, 2017). The use of alternative representations does not deny the existence of LDs in a child's life, but it makes visible how disability constitutes a boundary object, fluidly adopting distinct configurations with different consequences across disparate settings even *within* the same institution (Artiles, 2011). For instance, alternative developmental representations are needed of undocumented immigrant learners struggling to learn, considering that they *simultaneously inhabit multiple temporal worlds* (Kohn, 2016)—of the home country left behind, of the homemaking process away from home, of the liminal waiting pause dictated by immigration agencies while stuck in a shelter.

Race, in turn, has comparable qualities. It has transmogrified from a biological marker into a sociocultural category, and more

recently, biological categorizations of race are returning (Bobo, 2015). It is not surprising, therefore, that race has "played a significant role in the symbolic economy of disease" (Schweik, 2009, p. 193). Other commentators contend that race is an empty category in light of contemporary genetic evidence and celebrate the advent of a post-racial society. However, a plethora of research suggests that race continues to have a heavy structural weight in people's lives and the stratification of societies (Bobo, 2011). Stuart Hall (1997) described race as a "floating signifier" because "what racial difference signifies is never static or the same" (p. 2). In this sense, race can be construed as lived experience shaped by contexts, societal relations and institutional dynamics (Garcia, Sanchez, Sanches-Youngman, Vargas, & Ybarra, 2015).

Collages on disability disparities: Interdisciplinary affordances. Revisioning representation and illuminating the fluid nature of marked categories have key implications for a new research program. I illustrate interdisciplinary affordances (e.g., the spatiality of inequities) to enrich research questions, sampling, fieldwork, and data collection/analysis procedures. I also describe alternative ways to study the *production* of disability disparities and documenting the material consequences of disproportionality.

Traditional studies have shown that students are over- or under-identified. Interdisciplinary collages of representation will document macro patterns as well as material everyday histories with injustices and barriers to educational opportunities that mediate various configurations of disability disparities. Quantitative disproportionality research, for instance, examining contextual influences or the role of race are emerging (Bal, Afacan, & Cakir, 2019; Fish, 2019). Furthermore, spatial representations of this problem are adding analytical power (Artiles, 2003, 2011). But additional interdisciplinary cross fertilizations are needed. Research on geographies of opportunity afford significant insights about the socio-historical contexts of educational inequity (Hogrebe & Tate, 2012; Powell, 2015). Scholars have created "maps [that] can visually track the history and presence of discriminatory and exclusionary policies that spatially segregate people" (Reece & Gambhir, 2008, p. 5; Matthews, Detwiler, & Burton, 2006). The literature on neighborhood effects on opportunities, crime, and health outcomes will enrich the study of disability intersectionalities by transcending the traditional scrutiny of poverty concentration, by examining social ties and interactions, collective efficacy, institutional resources, and routine activities (Sampson, Morenoff, & Gannon-Rowley, 2002). My colleagues and I illustrated the promise of this perspective by assembling evidence on a Chicago neighborhood that raised intriguing questions about the social and cultural dynamics of disproportionality (Artiles, Kozleski, Waitoller, & Lukinbeal, 2011). These lines of research are not in conversation with one another but have great potential for producing interdisciplinary collages of representation to refine this literature.

We should also pursue deeper reflexivity in our fieldwork. An insightful example came from Paredes's (1984) reinterpretation of anthropological studies with Chicanos/Mejicanos. He illuminated fieldwork contingencies, such as how informants can select the researcher, use their agency and humor, and engage in multiple levels of meaning, making during fieldwork encounters that are seldomly perceived by researchers. As a result of Paredes's reinterpretations, a nuanced profile of Chicanos/Mejicanos emerged. What are the implications for future disproportionality research fieldwork?

Researchers can also document the mutability of disability and race in the *production* of disability identification disparities. I describe this phenomenon as *the sculpting of (in)competence with ephemeral categories*. Race and culture are prominently *visible* before referrals, since poverty and the cultural practices of families of color are often blamed for the developmental defects of their children. Paradoxically, race and culture *disappear* in referrals as teachers frequently claim colorblindness when making such decisions. Once the assessment process launches, race and culture remain *visible* **and** *invisible* (i.e., deficits are tallied, but colorblind special education tools and knowledge *erase* race and culture during the team's assessment). When the team convenes to interpret assessment evidence and elucidate a diagnosis, race and culture *disappear* again, since policy prescribes that a disability diagnosis cannot be assigned if student struggles are associated with socioeconomic, cultural, or linguistic differences. Nevertheless, race subsequently *reemerges* in this maze of identities through the official count of body colors by disability done for Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) monitoring purposes. Once students are placed in special education, race *disappears* again due to the colorblind nature of special education interventions and programs.

The *sculpting of (in)competence with ephemeral categories* legitimizes the traditional logic that regards disability identification of White and students of color *as meaning the same thing*, despite the structural inequities that differentially affect students of color, and notwithstanding the evidence on more segregated placements for African American learners with the same disability diagnosis as their White peers (Artiles, 2011). The assumption is that identification practices across races are the "result of *neutral* sorting and choice" (Harris, 2001, p. 1774, emphasis added). In this sense, race becomes raceless, since it ignores the asymmetrical nature of race—"of resources, power, access, and social status" (Harris, 2001, p. 1767).

There is a dearth of research on disproportionality documenting the *sculpting of (in)competence with ephemeral categories*, particularly during gatekeeping events, such as disciplinary sanctions, referrals, and eligibility meetings. *Situated analyses* of the fluid meanings of race and disability must be conducted during such institutional occasions, taking into account "the whole ensemble of social and individual relations in which [a researcher's perception] functions, and of which it is an expression" (Wartofsky, 1985, p. 237).

My analysis raises unsettling questions. How do these forms of racecraft (Fields, 2001) contribute or deter identification disparities, particularly given the longstanding "complex fabric of structural ambiguity" that has permeated decisions to identify "the other?" (Schweik, 2009, p. 192) What silences are forged in disciplines when race and culture become residual categories in disability diagnostic decisions? What kinds of ethical analysis can be done at the intersections of lived experiences and these

ephemeral categories? (Star & Bowker, 2007) What kinds of representations are needed to document the fleeting meanings and uses of race and disability? Do these shifting meanings apply differently to subgroups *within* racial or linguistic groups or to different disability categories?

Moreover, the *material consequences* of disability identification on students of color and their everyday histories with educational inequities have been under-examined. We need studies on the spaces between what laws and policies *are* and what laws and policies *do* (i.e., "how legality is an ongoing structure of social action" [Silbey, 2005, p. 328]). Researchers are beginning to illuminate the implementation twists and turns of policies that monitor disability disparities and impose sanctions on failing districts (Tefera & Voulgarides, 2016). For instance, we found that only a small number of states report disproportionality rates that trigger legal action or document placement patterns resulting from "inappropriate identification." This is due in part to states' modifications of disproportionality thresholds (Cavendish, Artiles, & Harry, 2014). Thus, some states seem to be engaged in ritual conformity with federal policy requirements without altering the inequities targeted in those policies (Scheid & Suchman, 2001). In turn, the policy apparatus seems to be endorsing legal deference (Edelman & Talesh, 2011) (i.e., the assumption that the *mere presence* of a reporting structure for disability counts by race means that districts are complying, irrespective of whether the structure protects learners of color).

Voulgarides (2018) examined the aftermath of disproportionality citations in suburban districts in the northeastern United States. She reported that

> [t]he educators in [one of the participating districts] . . . tended to describe the segregation in the community and schools as a relatively normal fact of life. One grade school teacher noted that issues in Gerrytown surrounding "things like race and disproportionality" have "been going on for decades." A grade school psychologist told me "it is a divided community" and "there has always been a big difference between east Gerrytown and west Gerrytown" (p. 46).

Voulgarides (2018) also documented influences inside suburban districts under citation that might contribute to institutional climates in which disproportionality is suspended in a web of competing demands and priorities. Powerful interest groups with robust and cohesive cultures had an immense influence in this district. School personnel described the district as having deep roots in the community. It was a culture governed by a powerful group of parents with a tight and sweeping reach. Voulgarides (2018) documented an incident involving a teacher: "the day after she taught her tenth-grade class a poem written by a Black female author, she received several visits and phone calls from parents who felt 'uncomfortable' with the content of her lesson" (p. 61).

The influence of this group also impacted the school principal. At some point, she confided: "How can I protect the kids, my staff, and my own job when parents are so combative? For example, once a parent said something about one of my teachers and now no one wants to be in that teacher's class, but the teacher is actually really good" (p. 62). In fact, the principal

could not inform parents that the district had been cited for disproportionality. When asked what would happen, she said,

> Board meetings are a sea of white faces and you just can't explain disproportionality to them. [English language arts] scores are more important to these people than is disproportionality and we have people, staff, administrators that in this climate have to protect their jobs. They are facing foreclosures, bills and other economic hardships and their jobs cannot be in jeopardy (p. 63).

These kinds of representations shed light on the contextual and cultural arenas of disability identification disparities. These representations are a reminder that *this problem is not only about diagnostic accuracy*. Furthermore, an orientation to enact Wartofsky's tertiary artifacts, a new imagination, is urgently needed (Gutiérrez et al., 2017). In this regard, there is a "fugitive" intervention literature, as substantial efforts have been made to alter this problem but were conducted as part of technical assistance grants (Ahram, Fergus & Noguera, 2011; Kozleski & Artiles, 2015). We must make this work visible and use these findings to inform research funding priorities.

Conclusion

Paradoxes have emerged from efforts to remedy disability identification disparities. Disability has been historically targeted as needing invisibility through assimilationist understandings of inclusion (Mitchell, 2009). Race has also been made visible over time as a means to make certain groups disappear—both are targeted by the ideology of "the social ideal of erasure" (Mitchell, 2009, p. xi). A consequence has been that equity responses aim to protect these groups, while exclusion is reified and justified. The research knowledge produced to address this complex problem is unwittingly complicit in maintaining this state of affairs.

I interrogated what Stiker (2009) described as "the social and cultural ways of viewing—and of dealing with—what we so *imprecisely* call disability" (p. 1, emphasis added) and its historical entanglements with race and other marked categories. I also made visible the tensions between a world fraught with ambiguities and institutions' relentless demands to act and make decisions with resolute certainty about human affairs. But human activities are full of shades and contingencies. Adopting Luria's cultural vision of science will enable us to attain "the classical aim of explaining facts, while retaining the romantic aim of preserving the manifold richness of the subject" (Cole, 2005, p. 41). Thus, future research should embrace Said's double vision, "a self-conscious vision that always also interrogates its own conditions of viewing" (Kauffmann, 2013, p. 93). The production of alternative representations of the same phenomenon will assist us to meet this goal.

I also suggested researchers must espouse a moral commitment and thus should ground their work in a historical epistemology. This way the legacies of deficit thinking are made visible and substituted with asset approaches (Gadsden, Davis, & Artiles, 2009). This will allow us to avoid "white innocence"—the exercise of seeing scientific evidence about inequities as *new* insights, thus bestowing the innocence of a new beginning (Gotanda, 2004). We now know. We can no longer delay action.

NOTES

This article is slightly modified from the Fourteenth Annual *Brown* Lecture in Education Research, delivered on October 19, 2017, in Washington, D.C.

[1]Kanita's story was included in a four-year federally funded ethnographic research about racial disproportionality in special education (Harry, Klingner, & Cramer, 2007). The study focused on 12 schools representing a range of socioeconomic status (SES), demographics, and disability disparities. Twelve students were also chosen for in-depth case studies. Although some features of Kanita's story diverge from many students with disabilities, her experiences certainly reflect key aspects of the controversies surrounding disability identification disparities (Donovan & Cross, 2002).

[2]We relied on qualitative and quantitative tools to collect data over a 12-month period. Districts with extended histories of citations for disproportionality in special education were included. One-third of the state's suburban schools received citations for disproportionality. Suburban districts were also more likely than other districts to receive a repeated citation. Finally, significant racial, ethnic, and linguistic shifts have been documented in suburban districts (Frankenberg & Orfield, 2012).

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